

Father's Day 2009

Happy Father's Day to all of the father's and grandfather's in the audience today, and especially to our eternal Father, who art in heaven. I am Doug Hall and I have had the privilege of meeting many of you and some I have not yet met. Much like fatherhood itself it is my privilege and honor to speak with you today about what becoming and being a dad has meant in my life. They say that to be a child is to know the fun of living, but to have a child is to know the beauty of life. That is a sentiment I share today. It was about seven years ago that my then friend and neighbor Heather Duncan walked me through the doors of this beautiful sanctuary and back into the loving, open arms of Jesus Christ. I used to see Heather in the mornings on Sunday walking to this beautiful church and I would be walking to the Place to watch my Buffalo Bills football games and she used to always say to me that I should come join her sometime. She must have seen the pain and anguish in my face from the years of being a Bills fan. Well, it took me awhile to come around, but I finally did join her one day, and as they say the rest is history. She is now my beautiful wife and before I get started I just wanted to take a moment to acknowledge and thank Heather, who is a wonderful mother to our children, whose love is a blessing in my life and without her, literally none of this would be possible. (AND TO THINK I THOUGHT THAT WAS GOING TO BE THE EASY PART) Anyway, I would also like to thank Chip and Heather for giving me this opportunity to share a little bit of my life with you. When Chip asked me back in February if I would be interested in delivering the Father's day sermon, my impulsive, impetuous self, the one that always gets me into trouble by reacting without first thinking, or more importantly without praying, instantaneously blurted out yes, of course. It would be such an honor and a thrill. And it is all of that to be standing here in front of you today. But I must tell you, that after I had accepted Chip's most gracious invitation, I spent about the next two months tossing and turning at night wondering what I had just got myself into. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't that I was afraid that I didn't feel like I had a lot to say about how being a dad had completely changed my life in so many ways, including most importantly how it had drawn me much closer to God, having seen first hand in my life His almighty power and beauty to create life and how time had literally seemed to stand still on both occasions when my children were born: Or how I feel like the most blessed person in the world to be the father to Maximillian Scott and Emma Elizabeth Hall, which I do. No, I think this fear and resistance I was feeling was wondering how I was going to talk in a meaningful way about fatherhood when so many of

you have been fathers and even grandfather's for so much longer than I have, have seen and dealt with so many more situations than I have faced, have handled more trials and tribulations, dealt with more tears and setbacks, experienced more joys and achievements with your children than I have known or may ever know. After all, we are still working on things like potty training and throwing our food across the table, while many of you have kids in College, or beyond, and have been there and done that compared to what we are going through. But then I came across a favorite quote of mine from Romans 12:5 when reading the Bible one night that says "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all others" and I thought to myself if I can share my story and experiences with you and it can just encourage one single person in any manner, or give someone a different perspective on one issue that enriches their life than it will have been a worthwhile exercise. After all, each person is affected differently by many events that happen in life that are common to us as human beings, and my story of fatherhood is nothing if not unique.

So after I had cleared the mental gymnastics and decided to in fact proceed, the big challenge that presented itself was how in the world do I focus a talk about the most important thing in my life and narrow it down to a few talking points that fit into a twenty minute or so sermon. I pondered which direction should I go. I mean, do I discuss how the instant my son Max was born and entered into this world and right into my arms at Hogue Hospital that I felt like I had known this soul my whole life and he had suddenly manifested himself to me in a physical form. How my whole perception of time and life was changed in an instant and my fear of dying was vanquished in a moment of clarity, that the God of the Universe that can create life so beautifully must also sustain life in another unseen realm, as is quoted in the Psalms, "For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." I was at such a place of grace and peace that I finally understood that when we leave this world in a physical sense, we simply return our soul home to the love, grace and mercy of the Living God through Christ Jesus. I remembered an old quote from Winston Churchill after an allied victory, early in World War 2, when he was asked of the significance of the victory, he said, "well, it's not the end, or even the beginning of the end. But it is the end of the beginning. When Max was born the overwhelming sense that I felt was captured in Churchill's quote regarding that sense of transitioning from one phase of life to another. From things that had seemed so important to me just a few hours earlier when I had entered the hospital, like getting my oil changed on my car or setting up 3 new client meetings to meet my weekly

quota, to now a much more meaningful part of my life when I exited the hospital, filled with a greater love and responsibility than I had ever previously known. I knew how much I didn't know about what it would take and mean to be a good father. Admitting that seemed to take the pressure off, as it often does. But I knew also that I was excited to get started on this new journey.

Or should I speak about the shock, pain and anguish of getting a phone call 5 days after Max was born from the Doctors at Hogue Hospital informing us of the fact that Max had tested positive for a rare metabolic disease called Phenylketonuria (PKU) that no one, including our pediatrician, seemed to really have any information about other than it was going to radically change the way that we would have to raise our son. Talk about going from the penthouse to the outhouse in a hurry. I mean one second I am sitting on the couch with my wife and a seemingly perfectly healthy boy, I leave to go to the store for some groceries, only to return a few minutes later to see the look on Heather's face where she didn't even have to say a word. I knew right away that something awful had happened. You talk about needing God, acknowledging all of His glory and power and getting on your knees and praying for God's love and mercy. Nothing in my life had ever come close to preparing me for the strength we needed to endure those first few days of uncertainty. But that strength was supplied in spades by God through the Holy Spirit and I found myself and my faith growing stronger and deeper right in the midst of this trial. We were finally able to learn more about PKU through various sources, that this was a very treatable disease and not life threatening if detected at birth and we would be able to get the treatment Max needed through Choc hospital, where one of the nations top metabolic facilities exists.. The praise and love I felt for God was immense as the questions began to vanish and the answers came into focus. Sure we would have to make some sacrifices and alterations in our life but I instantly realized the bigger purpose for which God was calling me. That helped me turn my fear into love. There are no coincidences in life. God put Max here in this place so he could be treated by some of the top metabolic professionals in the world and we have been so blessed by Choc and Dr. Jose Abdeneur and his entire staff. Max is a great and healthy boy now aged 3 and although he will always be on a very restricted diet throughout his life, never able to eat things like Fish, Chicken, Meat, eggs, beans, rice, cheese and other high protein foods, he probably will develop a healthy amount of discipline and focus and also live the very productive life that God has planned for him.

Or should I focus on how when my daughter Emma Elizabeth was born my heart softened and expanded in ways I didn't think was humanly possible. I saw a tender side of my soul emerge because of her love and beauty that truly set me free from some of my emotional scars that I had been holding in for far too long. You see, our society can send the wrong messages about what it means to be a man in today's world, and it's easy to get sidetracked or caught up in a place where you don't even know how you got there. Sometimes God needs to get us back on track and focused on what He wants for us to achieve in our lives to bring glory to Him. Emma is the one who made me change my focus from external events over which I had no control, to being the most loving father I can be everyday so that at the end of my life I know I will have had a most positive affect on the thing that matters most to God, His children. That love and joy that Emma has brought into my life has transferred into other areas of my life and greatly expanded my horizons. She has brought me more patience, more tolerance and more perspective, three things I desperately needed. To see the world through her innocent, honest perspective is total truth, and helps me to restore some of my perspective back into this broken world in which we live. She is a true blessing in my life and the sweetest thing I have ever known.

So not knowing exactly which way to turn, I started to pray daily and asked for the Holy Spirit to impart some wisdom. Well, as usually happens, when we were are diligent in prayer and then listen, God does respond, although sometimes we are too caught up in our daily routines and lives to hear Him. Well this response came to me in the form of an email that a Christian friend of mine that I work with sent to me. It was called a love letter from God, and it was God speaking to us in the 1st person. This letter is a compilation of actual scriptures strung together to form a love letter from God to us. I'll share what it said with you now. (Insert Letter)

My Child,

You may not know me,
but I know everything about you.
Psalm 139:1

I know when you sit down and when you rise up.
Psalm 139:2

I am familiar with all your ways.
Psalm 139:3

Even the very hairs on your head are numbered.
Matthew 10:29-31

For you were made in my image.
Genesis 1:27

In me you live and move and have your being.
Acts 17:28

For you are my offspring.
Acts 17:28

I knew you even before you were conceived.
Jeremiah 1:4-5

I chose you when I planned creation.
Ephesians 1:11-12

You were not a mistake,
for all your days are written in my book.
Psalm 139:15-16

I determined the exact time of your birth
and where you would live.
Acts 17:26

You are fearfully and wonderfully made.
Psalm 139:14

I knit you together in your mother's womb.
Psalm 139:13

And brought you forth on the day you were born.
Psalm 71:6

I have been misrepresented
by those who don't know me.
John 8:41-44

I am not distant and angry,
but am the complete expression of love.
1 John 4:16

And it is my desire to lavish my love on you.
1 John 3:1

Simply because you are my child
and I am your Father.
1 John 3:1

I offer you more than your earthly father ever could.
Matthew 7:11

For I am the perfect father.
Matthew 5:48

Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand.
James 1:17

For I am your provider and I meet all your needs.
Matthew 6:31-33

My plan for your future has always been filled with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11

Because I love you with an everlasting love.
Jeremiah 31:3

My thoughts toward you are countless
as the sand on the seashore.
Psalms 139:17-18

And I rejoice over you with singing.
Zephaniah 3:17

I will never stop doing good to you.
Jeremiah 32:40

For you are my treasured possession.
Exodus 19:5

I desire to establish you
with all my heart and all my soul.
Jeremiah 32:41

And I want to show you great and marvelous things.
Jeremiah 33:3

If you seek me with all your heart,
you will find me.
Deuteronomy 4:29

Delight in me and I will give you
the desires of your heart.
Psalm 37:4

For it is I who gave you those desires.
Philippians 2:13

I am able to do more for you
than you could possibly imagine.
Ephesians 3:20

For I am your greatest encourager.
2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

I am also the Father who comforts you
in all your troubles.
2 Corinthians 1:3-4

When you are brokenhearted,
I am close to you.
Psalm 34:18

As a shepherd carries a lamb,
I have carried you close to my heart.
Isaiah 40:11

One day I will wipe away
every tear from your eyes.
Revelation 21:3-4

And I'll take away all the pain
you have suffered on this earth.
Revelation 21:3-4

I am your Father, and I love you
even as I love my son, Jesus.
John 17:23

For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed.
John 17:26

He is the exact representation of my being.
Hebrews 1:3

He came to demonstrate that I am for you,
not against you.
Romans 8:31

And to tell you that I am not counting your sins.
2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled.
2 Corinthians 5:18-19

His death was the ultimate expression
of my love for you.
1 John 4:10

I gave up everything I loved
that I might gain your love.
Romans 8:31-32

If you receive the gift of my son Jesus,
you receive me.
1 John 2:23

And nothing will ever separate you
from my love again.
Romans 8:38-39

Come home and I'll throw the biggest party
heaven has ever seen.
Luke 15:7

I have always been Father,
and will always be Father.
Ephesians 3:14-15

My question is...
Will you be my child?
John 1:12-13

I am waiting for you.
Luke 15:11-32

Love, Your Dad
Almighty God

Wow! God our father loves us so much that he says even the hairs on my head are numbered? As an aside, then He must also surely know that about half of mine have since fallen out and I am in desperate need of replenishment! Anyway, I finished reading this letter and I was overwhelmed as the themes in the letter were a perfect roadmap for what I am striving to be as a father. One of my favorite things about the Christian walk is that God reveals to us everything we need for success in any endeavor. He never withholds any information from us, it is just up to us to pay attention, turn off all the noise and static that sometimes distract us, and be faithful in prayer.

The four main themes that leaped off the pages after I finished reading this letter a few times, and spent some time in prayer, are Love, Patience, Forgiveness and Trust. LPFT, THESE LETTERS WERE CLEAR in my mind. If our Eternal Father loves us with these attributes, then trying our best to instill these same virtues into our roles as parents should work pretty well for us.

Let's start with L. L is for love. We know how important love is to God because Jesus himself told us. He said "love others as I have loved you." When it comes to our children, love is the greatest gift we can give them. There is no fear in love, as perfect love drives out all fear. A parent will run into a burning building to save their child because their love for that child is greater than their fear. But I believe the best way we as parents can express

perfect love to our children here on earth is through another four letter word spelled T-I-M-E. I have heard time expressed in many different ways, but one of my favorites is time is a linear measurement of successive increments of now. No matter where you are in time, the time is now! Time is our most elusive commodity. But I believe time spent in the here and now with our children is the best way we can ever spend our time. When we spend quality time with our children, it is one of the rare moments in life where a perfectly harmonious and symbiotic relationship exists in nature. Our children benefit from the thing that they most desire in their life, which is the attention and love of their parents (TEENAGE YEARS EXCLUDED) and we as parents benefit from the lessons that our children can still teach us about joy and beauty and imagination and endless possibilities. **The lessons we both learn from and teach to our children our God's greatest gifts.** We as parents also make God smile when we spend time with our children because He wants us to appreciate what precious gifts they are to us. Jesus made this point very clear as we heard in the scripture readings of Mark today. We live in a technologically driven world where we constantly feel rushed, stressed and burned out, like we don't have enough time. But I have heard it said that time is the one critic without ambition. Why not spend what time we do have with our children, showing them how much we love and care about them. I remember when I was a young child, the one thing I craved was for my father to spend time with me and to be affectionate towards me. Unfortunately for me, my dad never had much time to be with me or the confidence to express his love toward me in the way I needed, through physical interaction. The pain of that lack of affection and time spent with me from my father stayed with me for a very long time. It caused me many problems, but it also taught me many lessons. The fact that now God has given me a chance to show my own two young children how much I love them is a chance I am not willing to squander. What better way could I use my free time than to be affectionate with and fully engaged with my children. They will always have the security that I was lacking as a young child, knowing that their father loves them more than anything else in his life.

P is for patience and as a father of two toddlers boy do I need a lot of that. As a pastor friend of mine Pete McKenzie once told me, children come into this world and they are just cute, little sinners. They remind me of the little seagulls in the movie Trying To Find Nemo, walking around society yelling mine, mine, mine, mine. They are convinced that what the other kid has at any given moment is infinitely better than what they possess and they go on

a mission to take it at any cost. Luckily God provided a biblical role model about patience for us parents with the story of Job. God tested Job's faithfulness by testing his patience, seeing if he could endure trials and tribulations over a long period of time and keep his faithfulness and joy towards the Lord. Well, I know it is a pretty dramatic comparison, but in the middle of it sometimes it doesn't seem far fetched. It seems like our children are testing every single fiber of patience that we possess to see if we can endure it. I mean what is the Guinness Book World Record for the most times a child can say no in a given 24 hour period. Whatever it is, I swear my children must possess it. I remember my mother always telling me when I was growing up just wait until you have kids. I always wondered why she was saying that so much. Now I know why. I guess that must also be what makes being a grandparent so special. All kidding aside, it does take all of your energy and patience sometimes to watch your son knock your daughter down for the 5th straight time after you've told him to stop, or to quit taking and hiding all of her presents, or putting all of the leaves he can find in the back yard in her hair. But at some point I have tried to learn to laugh at all of the various tests that our kids put us through. Maybe it is part of God's lesson to not take ourselves so seriously, to realize that we are not in control of things the way we think we are, to let things evolve over time, to not be in such a hurry. The scriptures tell us to "be patient with each other, making allowances for each other's faults because of your love." I have found that the testing of my patience by my children has helped me immensely in other areas of my life to see the bigger picture, to try and enjoy all of the little things in life that sometimes we take for granted, to stop and smell the roses and to realize that sometimes being told no can be a blessing. Sometimes not getting what we think we want, when we want it, is God's way of protecting us, or telling us to trust Him more deeply, or who knows what else. There are many questions that we simply aren't suppose know they answers to in this world, and that is liberating to me. That helps me to have more understanding when my kids are testing the human limits of my patience.

F is for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a Holy Trait and a theme that is necessary part of fatherhood. We all make mistakes because we are all human. Why is it sometimes so hard for us to forgive others or even ourselves when we make mistakes? After all, if we have been forgiven by almighty God for our sins through our savior Jesus Christ then surely we can forgive our children when they make mistakes in their lives. Part of the process of being human is making mistakes and learning from those mistakes. Children make mistakes mostly out of innocence or

precociousness. Quickly pointing out their mistakes and forgiving them is a way to help them grow and learn. I can't tell you how many times in my life I wish my father would have been there to point out the mistakes I was making, before they became bigger and more consequential and took longer to unwind. One mistake that I try to not make is being overly harsh in judging my children's mistakes. Forgiving their mistakes and learning to forgive myself when I make a mistake as a parent is a necessary part of our growth. Some examples of this are: Max forgives me when I put his diaper on backwards, and I forgive him when he pees through the sheets! Emma forgives me on a daily basis when during moments of parental dementia I mistakenly call her Max and I forgive her when she hides all of my shoes in the back of the closet so I am late for work. Forgiveness is something that the world desperately needs more of and as fathers we can instill that trait in our children throughout their lives.

T is for Trust. Trust is a theme that flows throughout the Bible. Jesus often taught lessons through the use of parables. Many of those stories related to trust. Rick Warren, in his book "A Purpose Driven Life" points out that life is both a test and a trust. When we prove to God we are worthy as fathers we gain more trust from God. It is a virtuous cycle in those circumstances. On the other hand if we misuse the blessings God grants us, how can we expect anything but less responsibility granted to us by God as we move forward in this life and the eternal life that follows? Is there any bigger test or trust in this life that God gives us than how we perform as parents? As the author John Bunyan stated so eloquently "If my life is fruitless, it doesn't matter who praises me, and if my life is fruitful, it doesn't matter who criticizes me. I believe that God entrusts us, as father's and husbands, with our families. He expects us as men to be heads of our household who are dependable and whom our families can trust to lead them in many ways. Likewise, at some point, we need to trust our children to make good decisions with their life. Children crave the trust their parents have in them. I am convinced, 9 times out of ten, they want to prove us right for trusting them. The exceptions are when they want to test us, to test our patience, such as when you give your young son a paint brush and some paints and rather than paint on his easel he paints his sisters hair, or when he steals all the money from his sisters piggy bank and puts it in his, or I am sure as they get older, when you tell them to be home at 9 and they casually stroll in at Midnight and look at you like you have three eyes because your angry at them for being so late. However, I believe that ultimately both sides gain when there is trust that permeates the relationship between parents and children. Just to be safe though, it may be

best to heed the words of Ronald Reagan, and to use the phrase trust, yet verified, when dealing with our children.

An example of ideal trust can best be summed up in a story that ran in the London Times during World War 2. Every night the Germans were bombarding London with huge, 2000 lb. bombs that would light up the evening sky. When the bomb sirens sounded, the citizens of London were ordered to run to the underground tube, the subway system, to find shelter. One night a man and his 10 yr old son were running to the tube to avoid a particularly heavy bombardment, only to get there as the packed train doors were closing. As the train pulled away, the boy panicked and ran outside. The father chased him down and saw a large crater where a bomb had recently fallen, and told his son that this would make for an ideal hiding place until after the bombing has ceased. The man looked at his boy and said I'll go first and he jumped down into the 10 foot deep crater. The boy stood over the crater, terrified as the bombs fell around him and trembling as he couldn't see his father in the depths of the crater below. When a bomb fell and temporarily lit up the evening skyline, his father looked up from the hole and shouted to his son, I know you can't see me son, but I can see you, go ahead and jump son, I've got you. There are many times during our lives where we are asked to jump and we will not always be assured of the outcome. We can not always feel or see God at those times. But like the boy's father in the story, I believe God always sees us, and he is yelling to us go ahead and jump my child, I've got you. **May God Bless You All!**